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SIPDIS

FOR A/S FRAZER FROM VICKI HUDDLESTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ET](#) [UNREST](#) [ELEC](#)

SUBJECT: ETHIOPIA: PRIME MINISTER GIVES HIS VIEW ON  
INTERNAL STRIFE

Classified By: Charge Vicki Huddleston for reason 1.4 (b,d)

1. (C) I met with Prime Minister Meles on November 2 shortly after an Ambassador Donor Group meeting with the Foreign Minister. During this meeting I was able to raise the issues of concern to us: human rights, release of CUD/P leaders, restraint in the face of protests, and the need to move forward with creating more political space through dialogue. PM Meles said that we should be under no illusions the 25 CUD/P leaders that had organized the "insurrection" would be tried in a court of law, have access to families and medicines but under no circumstances be released. The PM said there would be a dialogue with the opposition in Parliament and those CUD/P leaders who were not arrested -- there are sixty on the council -- and who disavowed violence. He said that now the government -- with the "extremist" in jail -- was not longer in jail and could create political space and open a dialogue on the NEB, Parliament, Media and Rule of Law. He claimed that the violence was carried out by the unemployed youth not the population of Addis but the overreaction of the security forces has created a feeling of unfairness and frustration. The PM has -- perhaps unknowingly -- unleashed with the run up to the elections great expectations that democracy should be part of the Ethiopian culture. How well he manages these expectations may well determine if Ethiopia develops into a stable democracy. end summary.

2. (C) I opened this part of the conversation -- the first part was on the Eritrea/Ethiopia reported septel -- by telling the Prime Minister that in the Ambassadors' Donor Group meeting with the Foreign Minister the two theme reiterated by all ambassadors was that the detained CUD leaders should be released and that the GOE security forces should use maximum restraint in quelling the riots. The PM said he has spoken with the Foreign Minister and was surprised at what he heard because he had told British Ambassador Dewar, me, and the Opposition leaders that he was willing to seek a political solution via dialogue but that was only as long as they followed a peaceful path and avoided insurrection. He had agreed to wait until life and property were in danger. This had now occurred and there was no possibility of release for the CUD/P leaders as they had committed crimes that must be judged in courts of law. "Let me be very clear about this, you should have no illusions" -- they will not be released prior to standing trial.

3. (C) I pointed out that the PM had put into motion events that were changing Ethiopia. By approving open elections and campaigning there was a new atmosphere and much greater expectations. Now it would be difficult to control expectation unless he provided real political openings. The PM first responded that there would be no dialogue with those jailed, that was over. However, he did realize that he needed to reach out to those who did not vote for the ruling EPRDF party. Nevertheless, Addis does not represent Ethiopia and in his view the public were not supporting these disturbances as they did last June. Today it is Addis' 300,000 unemployed youth that are creating the disturbances. The CUD has mobilized this. CUD/P leader and mayor elect Berhanu Nega had written the "paper for insurrection." (I assume the PM was referring to the CUD/P plan for street actions that was distributed over the weekend calling for everything from honking horns to boycott of EPRDF business to a stay at home strike.) The Government was faced with a unacceptable situation the PM said. Even members and leaders of the CUD/P who disagreed with its leaders -- like Lidetu, who now fears for his life because he refused to join the CUD/P in its actions -- have been cowed by Hailu Shawel and the CUD leaders.

4. (C) I urged the Prime Minister that if these leaders were not released to ensure that they had access to medicines and to their families and that they would be speedily tried in an impartial court of law. He responded that this would be done. All the leaders had been escorted to their homes to pick up medicines and personal belongings and families would be allowed to visit. The GOE would closely follow the letter of the law in its treatment of those detained and throughout the judicial process. But, the PM said, we must understand that Ethiopian democracy can not be determined by the

international community-- whether we wish these leaders to be freed or not. Ethiopia must make these determinations and some embassies -- not the USG -- had perhaps unwittingly led some of the opposition leaders to believe that they could keep them out of jail or obtain their freedom if they were jailed. I told the PM I never doubted his word. I understood he would arrest them and ban the party if they engaged in what he termed "street violence" and I had made this very clear to the CUD/P leaders.

15. (C) The PM said that we had a package that the GOE and the Opposition had agreed upon and that this package would continue to be the basis for dialogue with the opposition in Parliament and those in the CUD who were not jailed and disavowed violence. The PM said that 25 of the 60 CUD/P Council members were arrested for insurrection. The remained he considered to have publicly or privately disavowed CUD/P's plan for civil disobedience. He had himself reviewed the list of those to be detained and was satisfied that there was ample evidence against them. The package of issue on which the dialogue will take place will be principally the NEB, the Parliament, the Media, and Rule of Law. The Troika met with the PM today who told them he was reviewing procedures for carrying out this dialogue. I raised the need to appoint a neutral NEB. The PM today in conversations with the Troika went further on reviewing Parliamentary rules that disadvantage the Opposition.

16. (C) In response to my complaint that the government had failed to go far enough in the dialogue the PM sated that the government had been in "limbo but now we know where we stand. Now we can move and we have committed ourselves to lining up to normal democratic practices and expect the same from the opposition." I ended with the hope that these political openings would be accompanied by economic opens as well, but that was a conversation for another day.

17. (C) Comment: The Opposition leaders will not be released because their call for street actions and the resulting violence in which at least yesterday the security forces overreacted and in one case shot into a group of school children is seen as a direct challenge to overthrow the government via a type of "Rose Revolution." Those leaders not detained still have the option of going into Parliament and City government or remaining outside of both. The Government seems more willing to actually move forward on creating more political space. However, whether they will do it fast enough to prevent the outbreak of more frustration and anger remains a question. The manner in which security forces treat the population is often bad and results in the population feeling it is abused and treated unfairly. There seems to be a new feeling that came out of the elections, namely that Ethiopian should have a democracy. The PM seems to believe that, too. (Perhaps not in the way we would wish because he is determined to control it.) But whether he can move fast and far enough to satisfy his people will be his challenge.

HUDDLESTON